

Attractiveness of job fairs for students as a platform for searching and exchange of information

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Abstract

Job fairs are one of the popular means used in communication between employers and potential employees in Poland. One of the groups, which the employer reaches through them are young adults entering the labour market, including students. The analysis of their behaviour constitutes the basis for preparation of the appropriate fair offer hence it is relevant to assess the attractiveness of job fairs and expectations towards them among this group of job seekers. The article presents the results of questionnaires conducted among 419 students of AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków indicating their reasons for participating in (traditional and virtual) job fairs and the level of satisfaction with their participation. The results show a greater interest in traditional job fairs on the part of respondents. In addition, there is a diversity of expectations of job fairs among students of technical and managerial studies.

Paper type: research article

Keywords: young adults, job fairs, virtual fairs, virtual job fairs, job search, labour market

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Introduction

In the literature of the subject, a lot of attention is paid to young market participants – representatives of Generation Y and Z – because they are an attractive group both from the perspective of analysis of their purchasing behaviours and those relating to their entry into the labour market. The results of the analysis highlight the specificity of groups of young participants often combining it with the impact of communication technologies, including the Internet. Wide access to technology resulted in a different way of its socialization in the case of young generations in comparison to older market participants, which generates higher technological competences among the representatives of this group and easier navigation in the world of new technologies. However, when describing the behaviours of young consumers, one should remember about development conditions because of which, despite the differences in the way of satisfying needs, their formation and nature can be explained by the theory of human development, including the importance of social factors.

These reflections should be referred to the method of job search by young people entering the labour market and investigations allowing employers to choose the appropriate forms and tools for communicating with this market segment within the external employer branding.³

The question about the effective reach of the message about the employer to the recipient requires the knowledge of their needs and habits to formulate not only the right message (employer value proposition) but to choose the tools for implementing the strategy of employer branding. The complexity and topicality of the issue is emphasized by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) in their attempt to systematize the concept. They pointed out, *inter alia*, the need to do analyses to identify tools and techniques that should be used in order to reach different groups of prospective employees.

When trying to win over young people seeking employment, taking into account their technological competences, it seems natural to conduct activities on the Internet (Holm, 2014). One of these forms that have their online and offline counterparts are job fairs, the focus of this study. A frequent location of traditional job fairs are universities as natural and big concentrations of people upgrading their skills and being attractive job candidates. These events attract the attention of students. However, it remains an open question what their main purpose of participation in such an event is. Such knowledge would allow potential exhibitors to settle any emerging dilemmas or determine if job fairs should be treated as another pro-

³ Actions of the company aimed at building the image of an attractive employer. The concept was created in the 90s of the twentieth century and Barrow is considered its author (Barrow & Mosley, 2005, p. 69).

motional event or accept that it is a place where one can mainly find future employees (interns/apprentices).

The research results described in the article create the need to find answers to the question whether job fairs are an effective way to reach young student job seekers with information about the employer and its offer and which of their forms (virtual or traditional) appears more attractive to students. This is especially so against the background of market signals, which indicate a weakening interest in virtual fairs in other industries on the Polish market. The study aimed to determine the attractiveness of job fairs for students depending on their type and selected demographic characteristics of students.

1. Young adults as job seekers

Recruitment is one of the most important areas of activities performed by companies, especially in the context of technological, demographic and economic changes from which there often arises the need to compete for the most qualified job seekers and taking account of the possibilities and expectations of the representatives of specific generations (Van Hoy & Saks, 2011). In recent years, the number of studies on this subject (Breaugh, 2008) has raised, increasing the need for a detailed analysis of all process steps. The development of a recruitment strategy, as one of the early steps in the process, requires answers to a few basic questions, including where to recruit, whom, when and on the basis of which message (Breaugh, 2008). These questions are also the basis for the development of employer branding activities and require coherent planning of both strategies. From the perspective of marketing, the answer to these questions is not possible without the knowledge of behaviours, preferences and expectations of job seekers.

One of the specific groups, on which researchers and employers focus, are young adults entering the labour market, including students. What is still valid is the question of what qualities of employers they consider attractive, what kind of activities related to job search are undertaken by them (where they look for information about employers) and what influences these processes.

When responding to a question about the scope of search for information by young potential employees what is important is the fact that they are not limited by the lack of technical competences allowing the use of new technologies. Therefore, one of the places of gathering information on career development for students seeking employment is the Internet. As a new level of communication, in recent years, it has provided many new opportunities to interact with users of the web, increasing the range of possible tools to use to share information with those resulting from the development of content generated by its users (e.g. word of mouth as part of social media platforms). At the same time, as Richards (2012) stressed, in addi-

tion to supporting activities related to employment, the advantages of the Internet can also be regarded as disadvantages. For example, in the case of employers monitoring and controlling the content placed on the Internet, which may raise doubts about the monitoring activities among current and potential employees in violation of their privacy. Nevertheless, the results indicate more positive aspects of using the Internet when looking for work, emphasizing not only the benefits for employers. The results of comparative tests carried out in Germany and South Korea are a good example. They showed that people using the Internet to look for work were more likely to find it again in the period of 12 months and were unemployed for shorter periods of time (Suvankulov, Lau, & Chau, 2012).

The results of research carried out among students in Kraków indicate that its resources are often viewed by the representatives of this group in search of information about employers and job offers (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka, Lipińska, & Stańczyk, 2013), regardless of their professional status. What was the most popular among the students were websites or specialist portals related to career and recruitment while there was little interest in virtual job fairs (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka et al., 2013).

The scope of tools used by employers to inform students about the ongoing recruitment process is not limited to websites and social media. Companies also reach for mobile applications or video (*Rekrutacja przyszłości*, 2016). That is especially so because according to Digital Sherpa a human mind processes visual information 60,000 times faster than text (*Rekrutacja przyszłości*, 2016). Among the activities undertaken by the company what should also be mentioned are (traditional and virtual) job fairs, which are a natural extension and complement to other opportunities of searching for available job offers.⁴

More and more often research confirms that the decisions related to the search for and selection of jobs – especially in the case of young adults – may also be based on comparisons with others and social impact (Kulkarni & Nithyanand, 2013). They believe that the attractiveness of the company as an employer is shaped by exchanging information with friends and family members in the context of interpersonal communication. This underlines the importance of word of mouth independent of intentions of the enterprise, which is an example of one of the less known sources of information about the company as an employer, although it is a common source of recommendations for young people. Jobseekers compare themselves with others, especially in ambiguous situations, the opinion and experience of their peers are important (they act like others). Moreover, when making

⁴ Tutorials on how to effectively look for employment recommend as a source of information, among others, contacts in the environment, newspapers, recruitment portals, bulletin boards, NGOs, labour offices, employment agencies and personal counselling, career offices, websites of employers and job fairs (CV ensures that we are invited for a job interview, n.d.).

decisions about jobs, they often rely on information from other people (informational social influence).

The answers of students confirm that word of mouth influences their perception of the attractiveness of the organization, and negative information handed down by their peers may even reduce the effects of recruitment campaigns. Research carried out among students in India showed that they do not perceive themselves as persons who are subject to social influences (compared to others) (Kulkarni & Nithyanand, 2013). When justifying in what areas the impact of social factors on the job search process by others is visible, they indicated that peers are more accessible and reliable than organizations, information shared by the company is not objective and jobseekers have the right to access the information from other sources. In addition, they stressed that in the absence of other indications, peers or decisions to indicate social status seeking work are imitated. In reference to the situation of the job fairs, the opinion of the person accompanying the job seeker significantly affects the assessment of attractiveness of potential employers (Kulkarni & Nithyanand, 2013).

2. Job fairs as a form of communication of employers with potential employees

Modern economic fairs derive directly from the events of a commercial nature and, therefore, most of the literature originally treated them as an instrument of the sales process (Kerin & Cron, 1987; O'Hara, 1993). Only did the growing importance of the process of conscious development of relations with stakeholders result in the economic fairs being treated as a potential tool in this process. Witt and Rao (1989) and Li (2007) emphasize the impact of economic fairs on the development of long-term relationships between the offering and the recipient.

Today's business fairs (Geigenmüller, 2010) are seen as a periodic event in which different groups of entrepreneurs from the industry (and related industries) meet to deepen relations through the exchange of knowledge and information and to strengthen communication in order to improve relationships and increase their benefits. The activities used by fair exhibitors are a combination of different instruments of communication and direct sales. They are used to draw attention to the company and its products and to encourage interaction with the company. They are referred to as strategic tools, during which companies establish different relationships in order to achieve their goals. It is assumed that fairs have five basic functions: transactional, informational, social, symbolic and cultural (Tafesse & Skallerud, 2015).

When observing the current practice at job fairs, one can notice that the events are dominated by the atmosphere of fun rather than well thought-out measures aimed at shaping long-term relationships. However, the conviction of entrepre-

neers about the need to participate in job fairs makes their number continue to grow (*Global Exhibition Industry Statistics*, 2014). The popularity of fairs also reflects the fact that due to their specificity they offer great opportunities to use different communication tools, their individual choice and free innovation (Proszowska, 2015). Virtual fairs are an example of an innovative approach to the development of relationships that offer both exhibitors and visitors a range of advanced technologies to help achieve their goals.

Job fairs are a specific fair event. In this case, there is a meeting of exhibitors, businesses seeking employees (or trainees), and trade visitors who are most often job candidates. Depending on whether the labour market is the employee or employer market, a different group of participants will play a dominant role. Candidates, at the same time, are often for the company its current or potential customers, and contact with them can also be used to present the product range of the company. An exhibitor at job fairs should have the knowledge about the motives for participation in the fairs by visitors, especially in the case of such a diverse audience as young adults.

Job fairs are popular in Poland. In 2015, there were nearly 100 events of this kind in Poland, in the largest academic centres (e.g. Warszawa, Kraków), but also in smaller cities (e.g. Wadowice, Jędrzejów). What is also visible among them is a certain level of specialization, such as, engineering job fairs and networking solutions in the form of, inter alia, Career Days organized in 2015 in 9 Polish cities (*Dni kariery*, 2015), the Graduate Talent Days (5 locations in 2015) (*Absolvent Talent Days*, 2015). These events are usually organized under the auspices of the labour offices and bodies concerned with the wider HR consulting and professional and higher education. Universities and high schools intensively propagate them through career offices and student organizations which are often the co-organizers of such events (e.g. BEST, AIESEC).

Job fairs dedicated to students require exhibitors (potential employers) not only to prepare the job offer or internship but also to take actions to strengthen the image of the employer. Career counselling (e.g. seminars on how to write a CV, the opportunity to take a professional photo for documents, etc.) and information and promotional materials (company gadgets) are an example.

In addition to traditional fair events, the exchange of information between employers and job seekers is also possible in the form of virtual job fairs. By design they allow to learn about job offers from anywhere and submit an application at any time. However, they eliminate direct contact with a potential candidate for the job, which prevents the full assessment of their powers and limits the possibility of interaction.

Table 1 *Comparison of the most important features of traditional and virtual job fairs*

Traditional job fairs	Virtual job fairs
Independent of the level of technological competences of fair participants	Participation in fairs requires technical competence and access to the Internet from participants
Unlimited social interaction	Limited social interaction
Many possibilities of verifying competences of candidates	Limited opportunities to check the competences of candidates
Restricted access resulting from the necessity of physical presence	Access from anywhere and at any time
Possibility of obtaining gratification (e.g. in the form of gadgets)	Limited possibility of additional gratification of fair participants
Possibility of shaping the image of the company on the basis of additional activities	Limited opportunities to shape the company's image based on additional activities

3. Methodology of empirical research

Summaries of job fairs dedicated to students indicate considerable interest in them by those seeking jobs.⁵ However, the same statistics are not a sufficient argument when assessing the attractiveness of this form of communication with potential candidates for the job. This requires the determination of the attitude towards job fairs and the reasons associated with participation in them. This study aims to determine the ratio of job fairs (participation in fairs as a behavioural component, the level of satisfaction with participation in the fairs as an emotional component) and the reasons for the participation in them. It was assumed that it is interesting to examine to what extent the reason for participation in job fairs by young people is the need to find employment and to what extent to collect information about the company and its offer arising from the interest in the labour market. In examining the attractiveness of this type of trade fairs, the authors decided to refer to the traditional and virtual job fairs assuming that, despite the absence of restrictions arising from technical competences, traditional job fairs are more attractive.

The study was conducted in November and December 2015 among the students of the AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków. The authors deliberately sought students with different competence profiles, hence the respondents were students of two departments: Management (managerial studies) and Geology, Geophysics and Environmental Protection (technical studies).

Data were collected through auditorium questionnaires, which consisted of two main parts that allow to get to know the attitude of the respondents to (traditional and virtual) job fairs and the reasons for and the effects of participation in

⁵ Events from Career Days were visited in 2015 by 40,000 people, and Absolvent Talent Days by more than 45,000 people (*Dni kariery*, 2015; *Absolvent Talent Days*, 2015).

fairs. After the initial selection and preparation of data, 419 cases were accepted for the proper analysis.

Characteristics of the population examined was included in Table 2.

Table 2 *Distributions of basic metric variables – sample characteristics*

Variable	Values	Number of cases	Percentage
Gender	female	279	67
	male	140	33
Professional status	working student	117	28
	not working student	301	72
	no data	1	0
Year of study ⁶	I year/I stage	32	8
	II year/I stage	104	25
	III year/I stage	90	21
	IV year/I stage ⁷	5	1
	I year/II stage	61	15
	II year/II stage	123	29
	no data	4	1

The study involved people of 19 to 27 years of age. These were mostly women (67%), which corresponds to the specific gender distribution of students at the two departments selected for research. A slight majority was represented by those studying management (213 people) in the comparison with 213 respondents from technical courses.

4. Attractiveness of job fairs in the opinions of respondents

The assessment of the attractiveness of job fairs in the eyes of students was started with an analysis of their participation in fairs. Respondents reported how often they participate in both of the analysed forms of job fairs (traditional and virtual). The results confirm little interest in virtual job fairs among respondents. While in the case of traditional job fairs slight majority of the respondents participated in them at least once (more than 53% of respondents), only 11% of them participated in virtual fairs (Table 3).

⁶ The system of higher education in Poland is a two-stage, whereby, depending on the field of study, the stages differ when it comes to the time of studying. Bachelor studies last 6 semesters and engineering studies – 7 semesters. Continuation of education at the second stage in these cases lasts, respectively, 4 and 3 semesters.

⁷ Seventh (last) semester of engineer studies.

Table 3 *Participation of respondents in job fairs*

Categories	Participation in traditional fairs		Participation in virtual fairs	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Yes, I regularly participate.	82	19.57	12	2.86
Yes, I have been there once out of curiosity.	142	33.89	35	8.35
I was thinking about going there but I decided not to.	55	13.13	34	8.12
I have never been there, but I am planning to go.	78	18.62	196	46.78
I have never been there and I am not planning to go.	62	14.79	138	32.94
no data	0	–	4	0.95

Importantly, the results do not support the hypothesis that the interest in the analysed forms of job fairs is dependent on gender (not statistically significant dependence), although certain trends emerged. Representatives of both sexes have more experience with participation in traditional trade fairs and in this case there appeared to be very weak correlation indicating more frequent participation in this form of trade fairs for women ($\chi^2 = 15.9$; $p = .0031$; V Cramer = .1048). Virtual job fairs were more popular among a greater percentage of men (14.5% of them) compared to women, of which less than 10% had such experiences (of which only 1.8% more than once). However, the differences obtained are small (no statistical significance). There are also differences in interest in participation in job fairs depending on their professional status.

However, according to the expectations, an interest in participating in fairs is dependent on the degree of studies. Graduate students – of the second stage of studies – more often declared participation in job fairs (here percentage of indications exceeded 60%). In addition, there is a visible difference in the interest in fairs depending on the department (courses of studies). Students of management ($p = .0002$) more often participate in (traditional and virtual) job fairs. This diversity is probably due to the different situation of people with such diverse competencies on the labour market. Graduates of management are more aware of the need to compete on the labour market, and therefore, more actively explore this market. What is also important are the specifics of today's Polish labour market which offers better employment opportunities to people with technical education than those with humanistic education.

In the next step, it was decided to identify the reasons for participation in trade fairs and the level of satisfaction with participation in them limiting the sample to only the people who have already participated in such events.

As expected, the participation of students in job fairs results both from seeking employment or internship and the desire to broaden their knowledge of the labour market (Table 4). The answers of respondents indicate the importance of additional

measures taken by potential employers as motivating factors for participation. Besides searching for specific offers and possibilities of application, students emphasized the opportunity to gather information about the labour market and its participants.

Table 4 *Reasons for participating in job fairs by the surveyed students*

Reasons for participation in job fairs	Number of replies	Percentage of responses	The percentage of cases
Job seeking	95	21.99	47.98
Gathering information about the labour market	79	18.29	39.90
Looking for internship	71	16.44	35.86
Applying to a particular company (submitting CV)	63	14.58	31.82
Collecting promotional materials	50	11.57	25.25
Conversation with employees of specific companies	48	11.11	24.24
Accompanying others	26	6.02	13.13
In total	432	100.00	218.18

n = 198, multiple-choice question.

The distribution of responses indicates rational motivation focused on the purpose of the activity of those studied. However, some respondents also admitted that their participation in job fairs was related to motivation of a social nature (accompanying others, talk with company employees). It can be linked to the previously-mentioned research results, which indicated that decisions about (and job search) are based on social comparisons and influence of others, especially in the case of relatively young job-seekers. Lack of social interaction during virtual fairs could be a potential explanation of their smaller attractiveness for the test group.

The importance of social interactions for the study group is also apparent in the sources of information about the job fairs. Respondents declared that they learn about them mainly from the Internet and from friends and family members. Other sources have much less indications (Table 5).

While such a result is consistent with the patterns characteristic of the study group concerning search for information, which is dominated by word of mouth (both on the Internet and through direct interaction with others), it does not directly indicate the ineffectiveness of the measures taken under the traditional sense of marketing communication (advertising in various media).

Table 5 Sources of information about job fairs among respondents

Source of information about the job fair	Number of responses	Percentage of responses	The percentage of cases
The Internet	134	39.18	67.68
Friends/family	75	21.93	37.88
Out-of-home advertising	48	14.04	24.24
Newspaper ads	38	11.11	19.19
Television	25	7.31	12.63
Other sources	22	6.43	11.22
In total	342	100.00	172.73

n = 198, multiple-choice question.

Respondents variously assessed their level of satisfaction with participation in job fairs, depending on their form ($t = 3.056$, $p = .0025$). Those respondents who participated in traditional job fairs were satisfied with the participation in them ($M = 3.8112$, $d = 4$, $SD = 0.7910$; scale of 1 to 5 – the highest rating), and the participants of virtual job fairs mostly demonstrated an ambivalent attitude ($M = 3.4334$, $d = 3.0$, $SD = .8206$).



Figure 1. The level of satisfaction with participation in the traditional and virtual fairs among respondents.

The level of satisfaction with participation in job fairs is connected with the sex of the respondent only in the case of traditional job fairs. Here men declare a higher level of satisfaction with participation in them ($p = .03485$). However, in the case of virtual fairs, the results are not statistically significant (although this may be due to the small percentage of people participating in this form of fairs).

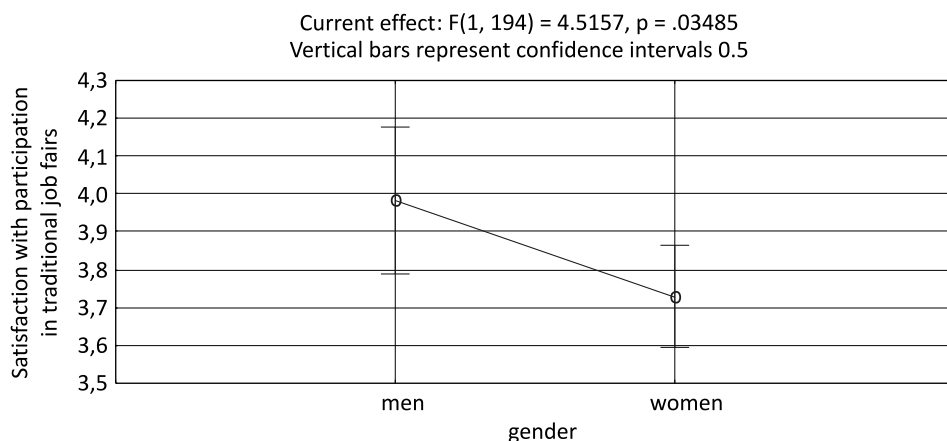


Figure 2. *The level of satisfaction with participation in traditional job fairs among respondents.*

Table 6 *Effect of participation of respondents in job fairs*

Effect of participation in job fairs	Managerial studies Faculty of Management		Technical studies Faculty of Geology, Geophysics and Environmental Protection	
	Number of responses	The percentage of cases	Number of responses	The percentage of cases
Gathering information about the labour market	54	45.4	30	41.5
Submitting CVs in selected companies	33	27.7	37	27.7
Conversations with representatives of selected companies	27	22.7	21	20.2
Collecting promotional materials	19	16.0	26	25.0
Finding internship	19	16.0	24	23.1
Finding employment	9	6.7	11	10.6

Students of Faculty of Management $n = 119$; students of Faculty of Geology, Geophysics and Environmental Protection $n = 104$; multiple-choice question.

Respondents were also asked about the effects of their participation in job fairs. The results in this area are not surprising. Regardless of the course of studies, participation in job fairs allowed respondents to broaden knowledge about the labour market and created the opportunity to submit applications. In a small percentage of cases, responders found a specific job through this form of job search (job, internship or practice) – here the students of technical fields managed to do that more often.

Conclusions

Job fairs became a permanent element of the labour market in Poland. A number of events of this type is growing – and what goes with it – the number of exhibitors and visitors of job fairs. Therefore, what becomes more and more urgent is the evaluation of the functioning of these events, which can be the basis for the selection of specific events within the framework of the employer branding strategy and recruitment.

The study focused on a specific audience of the activities undertaken by future employers – students. Even though they are the generation of the Internet, the research showed that they are more often involved in traditional job fairs. In addition, students declared a higher degree of satisfaction with participation in such fairs, and were more sceptical about virtual fairs. One explanation for this is the possibility of a wider range of social interactions during traditional job fairs, and obtaining additional gratification (whether in the form of promotional materials or opportunities to improve skills allowing for more effective job search in the future).

The assessment of the attractiveness of job fairs is different depending on the course of studies (managerial and technical), which is evident, among other things, in the effects of participation in job fairs. Students of technical faculties more often find specific offers of internship or even jobs in such events. They pursue different goals while participating in the fairs – they more often draw attention to the offered promotional materials.

However, the results do not allow for the formulation of clear guidance to employers due to the limitations present in them. One of them is the homogeneity of the sample (one university). Although the results show a variation in the assessment of the attractiveness of job fairs in the group, we should definitely extend the scope of courses of studies analysed in order to show the need for profiling not only offer but also a form of job fairs and the scope of additional measures.

When explaining the validity of the study of satisfaction with participation in job fairs it was assumed that it can affect both the intention to participate in such events again, and the positive word of mouth relating to the event, and, more importantly, potential employers. This area requires detailed exploration, but the re-

sults indicate the validity of such analyses highlighting the importance of social factors (though not explaining their role).

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